

The Dangers of Sleep Deprivation in the Elderly

Knowing the Disorders & Understanding the Risks Can Greatly Improve Quality of Life

BRISTOL, NH – (May 12, 2010) – The National Sleep Foundation has reported that 24% of people aged 65-84 have been diagnosed with four or more medical conditions. In general, people with poor health or chronic medical conditions have more sleep problems. The study demonstrated this by reporting that 80% of the people in the study who had medical conditions also reported having a sleep problem. While a chronic medical condition itself can contribute to sleep deprivation, so too can sleep deprivation exacerbate the symptoms of a chronic medical condition.

Live Free Home Health Care is raising awareness in the local community about how important it is to recognize and treat sleep disorders in the senior population. Recognizing sleep disorders associated with aging can immediately help improve quality of life, both mentally and physically. A good night's sleep can go a long way towards increasing strength, lifting mood, and increasing the body's ability to fight infection. The following represent the most common sleep disorders affecting seniors:

- **Insomnia** - According to the National Sleep Foundation's Sleep in America poll, 44% of older persons experience one or more of the nighttime symptoms of insomnia at least a few nights per week or more. Insomnia is often related to an underlying cause such as a medical or psychiatric condition. If you are wondering if a loved one is suffering from insomnia, look out for symptoms like excessive daytime sleepiness and difficulty concentrating.
- **Snoring/Sleep Apnea** - Loud snoring can be a symptom of obstructive sleep apnea (OSA) and is associated with high blood pressure and other health problems. With OSA, breathing stops - sometimes for as long as 10-60 seconds - and the amount of oxygen in the blood drops. OSA can be a sign that there are other things going on as well. In fact, HealthCentral.com reports one of the characteristics of dementia is sleep disordered breathing. More than 80 percent of dementia patients have sleep apnea. Untreated sleep apnea puts a person at risk for conditions such as headaches, memory loss, depression and cardiovascular disease, among others.
- **Gastro esophageal reflux disease (GERD), Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), REM Sleep Behavior Disorder (RBD), Restless Legs Syndrome (RLS), and Advanced Sleep Phase Disorder (ASP)** are other common causes of sleep problems in the aging population. On the flip side, existing conditions can also affect good sleep. Diseases such as Parkinson's disease, Multiple Sclerosis and Alzheimer's and their associated symptoms commonly cause problems sleeping.

Aging related diseases can be difficult to deal with on their own; however, when coupled with sleep disorders, the effects can be devastating. Mentally, lack of sleep can cause confusion, distortion of memory, depression and decreased mental capacity. Long-term insomnia affects an individual's ability to react appropriately to stress, which increases the risk of developing mental illness. Studies report insomniacs are 3 times more likely to have a mental disorder. In the aging population, this can impact the severity of dementia and paranoia.

“Many times families dealing with the day to day challenges of caregiving for an aging loved one are caught up in treating diseases, making doctor appointments and keeping everyone safe and happy. Sleep disorders are commonly overlooked, because if the disorder is not such that it is keeping the caregiver awake, the family caregiver is resting during those times when the lack of

sleep might be noticed,” commented Jason Harvey, Co-Administrator of Live Free Home Health Care.

“Sleep deprivation symptoms also mirror other common signs of aging or disease, making it difficult to notice or diagnose a sleep disorder. Having a professional assessment and respite care during evening hours can go a long way in helping families get to the root of a hidden problem. After all, keeping an aging loved one at home is about improving quality of life. Sleep disorders can really take that away,” continued Harvey.

Physically, lack of sleep also has its effects. Commonly seen are diminished muscle strength and endurance, increased wear and tear on the vital organs, heightened sensitivity to pain, disruption of insulin production and sugar metabolism, increasing risk of diabetes and perhaps most importantly, a weakened immune system, which decreases defenses against illness.

Harvey concluded, “Aside from the increased risk for the aging loved one, sleep deprivation for family caregivers can also have noticeable consequences such as poor concentration, inability to perform tasks or process information easily and quickly and a decreased capacity of perceptual skills. Family caregivers must get rest so they can be recharged for the demands of daily caregiving of a loved one. This is another reason to consider professional respite caregiving.”

If you believe you or an aging loved one is suffering from a sleep disorder or sleep deprivation, it is important to contact a doctor or sleep specialist for a proper diagnosis. Here are some other sleep tips that can put one on the path to a healthy night’s rest:

- Maintain a regular bed and wake time schedule, including weekends
- Establish a regular, relaxing bedtime routine
- Create a sleep-conducive environment that is dark, quiet, comfortable, and cool
- Sleep on a comfortable, supportive mattress and pillows
- Use the bedroom only for sleep
- Finish eating at least 2-3 hours before bed
- Avoid caffeine close to bedtime
- Avoid nicotine
- Avoid alcohol close to bedtime

For more information about sleep disorders in the elderly and the importance of adequate sleep for the family caregiver, visit www.LiveFreeHomeHealthCare.com and learn how to get a healthy, restful night’s sleep.

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About Live Free Home Health Care, LLC:

Serving the Lakes Region and central New Hampshire, Live Free Home Health Care, LLC is dedicated to providing top quality care in the comfort of home as an alternative to assisted living facilities or nursing homes. Family owned and operated, Live Free Home Health Care offers a wide range of services, from companion care and assistance with activities of daily living to skilled nursing, and all care is supervised and updated by a registered nurse. Live Free Home Health Care also offers medical alert systems to provide extra peace of mind should an emergency care need arise. Whether the need is for short or long term care, Live Free Home Health Care’s compassionate staff promises to treat each client respectfully and like a cherished family member. For further information, contact (603) 217-0149 or visit www.LiveFreeHomeHealthCare.com.